

# Beyond emotional rhetoric to evidence-based policy making

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In her last major speech as Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Senator Amanda Vanstone addressed the Australia and New Zealand School of Government at the Australian National University in December 2005. Titled 'Beyond conspicuous compassion: Indigenous Australians deserve more than good intentions' what proved to be her Indigenous policy swan song was somewhat paradoxically heavy on compassionate rhetoric and light on any evidence.

Senator Vanstone revisited much old ground, blaming ATSIC for Indigenous neglect, land rights laws for delivering 'land rich but dirt poor' Indigenous Australians, supposedly living 'in a feudal system', suggesting that Indigenous people do not have the chance 'to effectively own their own home' and that education offered by the state to Indigenous children is 'second-rate offering the preservation of Indigenous culture as its objective'.

Many of these issues were not new. What was though, and what was picked up by the national media, was a focus on Indigenous outstations or homelands, tiny communities located on the Indigenous estate. The then Minister speculated that outstations might not be 'viable'—despite their growth in the past 30 years with absolutely minimal state support and existence for millennia prior to colonization; that they represent 'cultural museums' suggesting that they might be an archaic rather than modern community type; and that some may be risky environments for women and children', a highly emotive statement tendered without a shred of evidence.

The serious policy question that Vanstone raised was about the appropriate level of service delivery and support that could realistically be provided to the estimated 900 communities with populations of less than 100 scattered throughout remote and very remote Australia. But in subsequent media interviews, that message was lost as she continued to describe these small, remote Aboriginal communities as 'cultural museums' saying they might make people feel good, but they leave Indigenous Australians without a viable future. The proverbial dog whistle was blown; it was open season on outstations.

The conservative media and commentators were quick to respond. In an editorial 'Time for a solution: Residents of remote communities must not be left to rot', *The Australian* (04/02/06) perpetuated myths about outstations, suggesting that they are not economically viable, endorsing Vanstone's views, and obfuscating distinctions between townships and outstations in relation to health and education outcomes. Soon after, in an opinion piece 'The land rights initiative has failed: Abundance is a killer' in *The Australian* (07/02/06), Gary Johns, President of the

Bennelong Society, foreshadowed a mass depopulation of outstations owing to reduced income support payments. Such speculation of a massive outmigration has been rife—and wrong—since the early 1970s. It was used for decades, and again now, as justification for meagre or no state investment in services for outstation residents, Australian citizens.

What has been missing in this contrived and very public debate, to date, are two things, the voices of outstation residents and an evidence base. So let's move from emotive rhetoric to some empirical evidence.

Historically, the outstations movement of the 1970s was part of the Indigenous response to the failed state project of assimilation, a subject that conservative commentators do not care to broach. With land rights and self determination, Indigenous people exercised agency and choice to return to live on the customary lands that they now 'owned' under Australian law. Then and now there is no evidence that socioeconomic status was better at the larger, often artificial, townships—created by colonial fiat or missionary zeal—than at remoter outstations. Indeed, a number of economists, including E.K. Fisk, noted in the 1980s that the available evidence indicated that with enhanced access to the non-market or customary sector (wildlife harvesting) and opportunity for art and craft manufacture, livelihood prospects at outstations were better than at townships.

Recently released official statistics from the 2002 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) conducted by the ABS provide some contemporary evidence. NATSISS provides statistical support for the proposition that the 'real' economy in remote Australia is made up of three sectors, the market, the state and the customary. For example, 87% of Indigenous adults in discrete communities in very remote areas, mainly outstations, are estimated to have fished or hunted in a group. There is no evidence in NATSISS to suggest that socioeconomic status declines with community size and remoteness.

Even more recently statistics in the *Labour Force Characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians* published by the ABS in January 2006 challenge the notion that Indigenous outstation people will prosper if they migrate to urban or metropolitan situations. Indeed these statistics suggest that the Indigenous unemployment rate is lowest in remote areas, although this is clearly influenced by a high level of participation in the mutual obligation work-for-the-dole CDEP scheme. Nevertheless, there are clearly acute labour market problems in major cities and regional areas (where Indigenous unemployment rates are 18% and 23% respectively, 3–4 times the non-Indigenous rate) that the Australian government has been incapable of addressing. It is likely that labour migration from remote areas will exacerbate rather than ameliorate this problem, with hypothetical migrants from outstations least likely to compete for mainstream jobs.

There is a growing body of other evidence that goods and services produced by outstation residents on their lands generate benefits to people's livelihoods and the nation. An obvious example is Indigenous art, with the majority produced by thousands of artists living at outstations and drawing materials and inspiration from their country. Paradoxically again, a week before her ANZSOG speech Senator Vanstone declared Aboriginal art 'Australia's greatest cultural gift to the world' (*The Australian*, 29/11/05), unaware perhaps that most is produced at what she terms 'cultural museums'. In fact these are highly productive artistic communities, a success, not a failure, of land rights. Another example is the growing involvement of Indigenous people in formal resource management projects on the Aboriginal-owned estate and coastal zone. Not only is this evident in the harvesting (culling) of feral species like buffalo and pigs that cause environmental damage, but also in the eradication of exotic weeds, and recently in highly effective coastal surveillance for illegal foreign fishers.

In evidence to the House of Representatives Inquiry into Indigenous Employment last week, I suggested that conservative views that seek mainstream solutions to unusual Indigenous circumstances are unsound. It is important that Indigenous success in very difficult circumstances is celebrated, not demeaned; and that such success is rewarded not penalized by Indigenous specific and very important programs like the CDEP scheme. It is crucially important that Indigenous active choice is not discarded: many Indigenous people want to live on their customary lands and have done so since Australian laws returned their land to their ownership. They choose to do so irrespective of neglect in service provision on any needs-based criteria to outstations direct or to their township-based resource agencies.

Arguably, there is an inconsistency in Indigenous public policy as one set of policies facilitates land and native title claim and associated land ownership, while another set of policies (and policy proposals) looks to undermine capacity to reside, and make a livelihood, on this land. Ultimately, it is not in Australia's national interest to pursue the forced labour migration approach as Indigenous activities on their land generate national benefit that would be impossible if the Indigenous estate was depopulated and, ultimately, uninhabited.

Somewhat ironically, given the title of Senator Vanstone's speech, the policy proposals she and her acolytes put forward appear based only on emotion and ideology. Such approaches are short-changing Indigenous and national interests—it is imperative that sound Indigenous policy making is informed by realism and empirical evidence. This is a great challenge for bodies, such as the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, which are well positioned to make politically bipartisan sensible policy recommendations to a new Minister for Indigenous Affairs. Let's hope we start seeing a shift from emotion to evidence-based policy making.

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